

WESTERN FILMS

• **Western Films** or **Westerns** are the major defining genre of the American film industry, a nostalgic eulogy to the early days of the expansive, untamed American frontier (the borderline between civilization and the wilderness). They are one of the oldest, most enduring and flexible genres and one of the most characteristically American genres in their mythic origins. [The popularity of westerns has waxed and waned over the years. Their most prolific era was in the 1930s to the 1960s, and most recently in the 90s, there was a resurgence of the genre.

This indigenous American art form focuses on the frontier West that existed in North America. Westerns are often set on the American frontier during the last part of the 19th century (1865-1900) following the Civil War, in a geographically western (trans-Mississippi) setting with romantic, sweeping frontier landscapes or rugged rural terrain. However, Westerns may extend back to the time of America's colonial period or forward to the mid-20th century, or as far geographically as Mexico. A number of westerns use the Civil War, the Battle of the Alamo (1836) or the Mexican Revolution (1910) as a backdrop.

The western film genre often portrays the conquest of the wilderness and the subordination of nature, in the name of civilization, or the confiscation of the territorial rights of the original inhabitants of the frontier. Specific settings include lonely isolated forts, ranch houses, the isolated homestead, the saloon, the jail, the livery stable, the small-town main street, or small frontier towns that are forming at the edges of civilization. They may even include Native American sites or villages. Other iconic elements in westerns include the hanging tree, stetsons and spurs, saddles, lassos and Colt .45's, bandannas and buckskins, canteens, stagecoaches, gamblers, long-horned cattle and cattle drives, prostitutes (or madams) with a heart of gold, and more. Very often, the cowboy has a favored horse (or 'faithful steed'), for example, Roy Rogers' Trigger, Gene Autry's Champion, William Boyd's (Hopalong Cassidy) Topper, the Lone Ranger's Silver and Tonto's Scout.

Western films have also been called the horse opera, the oater (quickly-made, short western films which became as commonplace as oats for horses), or the cowboy picture. The western film genre has portrayed much about America's past, glorifying the past-fading values and aspirations of the mythical by-gone age of the West. Over time, westerns have been re-defined, re-invented and expanded, dismissed, re-discovered, and spoofed. In the late 60s and early 70s (and in subsequent years), 'revisionistic' Westerns that questioned the themes and elements of traditional/classic westerns appeared (such as Sam Peckinpah's [The Wild Bunch \(1969\)](#), Arthur Penn's [Little Big Man \(1970\)](#), Robert Altman's [McCabe and Mrs. Miller \(1971\)](#), and later Clint Eastwood's [Unforgiven \(1992\)](#)).

Westerns Film Plots:

Usually, the central plot of the western film is the classic, simple goal of maintaining law and order on the frontier in a fast-paced action story. It is normally rooted in archetypal conflict - good vs. bad, virtue vs. evil, white hat vs. black hat, man vs. man, new arrivals vs. Native Americans (inhumanely portrayed as savage Indians), settlers vs. Indians, humanity vs. nature, civilization vs. wilderness or lawlessness, schoolteachers vs. saloon dance-hall girls, villains vs. heroes, lawman or sheriff vs. gunslinger, social law and order vs. anarchy, the rugged individualist vs. the community, the cultivated East vs. West, settler vs. nomad, and farmer vs. industrialist to name a few. Often the hero of a western meets his opposite "double," a mirror of his own evil side that he has to destroy.

Typical elements in westerns include hostile elements (often Native Americans), guns and gun fights (sometimes on horseback), violence and human massacres, horses, trains (and train robberies), bank robberies and holdups, runaway stagecoaches, shoot-outs and showdowns, outlaws and sheriffs, cattle drives and cattle rustling, stampedes, posses in pursuit, barroom brawls, 'search and destroy' plots, breathtaking settings and open landscapes (the Tetons and Monument Valley, to name only a few), and distinctive western clothing (denim, jeans, boots, etc.).

Western heroes are often local lawmen or enforcement officers, ranchers, army officers, cowboys, territorial marshals, or a skilled, fast-draw gunfighter. They are normally masculine persons of integrity and principle - courageous, moral, tough, solid and self-sufficient, maverick characters (often with trusty sidekicks), possessing an independent and honorable attitude (but often characterized as slow-talking). The Western hero could usually stand alone and face danger on his own, against the forces of lawlessness

(outlaws or other antagonists), with an expert display of his physical skills (roping, gun-play, horse-handling, pioneering abilities, etc.).

Subgenres of Westerns:

There are many [subgenres](#) of the typical or traditional western, to name a few:

- the epic Western (i.e., **The Big Country (1958)**)
- the 'singing cowboy' Western (films of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, see below)
- the "spaghetti" Western (the "Man With No Name" trilogy of films by Sergio Leone)
- the "noir" Western (i.e., **Pursued (1947)**)
- the "contemporary" Western (i.e., **Hud (1963)**)
- the "revisionistic" Western (i.e., **Little Big Man (1970)**, **Dances With Wolves (1990)**)
- the "comedy" Western (i.e., **Cat Ballou (1965)**, **Blazing Saddles (1974)**)
- the "post-apocalyptic" Western (i.e., **Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior (1981-2)**, **The Postman (1997)**)
- the "science-fiction" or "space" Western (i.e., **Outland (1981)**)

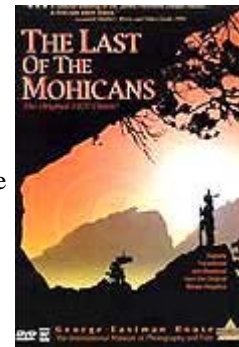
Influences on the Western:

In many ways, the cowboy of the Old West was the American version of the Japanese samurai warrior, or the Arthurian knight of medieval times. [No wonder that westerns were inspired by samurai and Arthurian legends, i.e., Kurosawa's **Yojimbo (1961)** served as the prototype for Clint Eastwood's **A Fistful of Dollars (1964)**, and Kurosawa's **The Seven Samurai (1954)** was remade as John Sturges' **The Magnificent Seven (1960)**. *Le Mort D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory also inspired much of ★ [Shane \(1953\)](#) - a film with a mythical western hero acting like a noble knight in shining leather in its tale of good vs. evil.] They were all bound by legal codes of behavior, ethics, justice, courage, honor and chivalry.

Western Film Roots:

The roots of the film western are found in many disparate sources, often of literary origins:

- folk music of the colonial period
- James Fenimore Cooper's novels such as his 1826 story *The Last of the Mohicans* (re-made as a feature film at least three times - Clarence Brown's 1920 version, a 1932 version starring Harry Carey, and George Seitz' 1936 version with Randolph Scott, and most recently as the popular film **The Last of the Mohicans (1992)** starring Daniel Day Lewis as the heroic white frontiersman scout named Hawkeye, raised as a Mohican)
- Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail (1849)*
- Samuel Clemens' (Mark Twain) *Roughing It (1872)*
- Bret Harte's short stories
- dime novels about Western heroes
- Owen Wister's influential *The Virginian*, published in 1902, the first modern western novel
- prolific Zane Grey's (1875-1939) 60+ novels that inspired dozens of films, including his best-known western *Riders of the Purple Sage (1918, 1925, 1931, 1941)*; also *The Rainbow Trail (1918, 1925)*, George Seitz's *The Vanishing American (1925)* - the first film made in Monument Valley, *Rangle River (1937)*, *The Mysterious Rider (1933, 1938)*, *Lone Star Ranger (1942)*, *Nevada (1927, 1936, 1944)*, *Western Union (1941)*, *Gunfighters (1947)*, and *Red Canyon (1949)*
- other mythologies (tales of Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, Jim Bowie, Gen. George A. Custer, Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody, Calamity Jane, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Bat Masterson), and outlaws (such as the James Brothers, the original Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and Billy the Kid)
- screen cowboy Gene Autry's "Cowboy Code" (or Cowboy Commandments) written in the late 1940s - a collection of moralistic principles and values that cowboys reportedly live by, including such tenets as: the cowboy never shoots first or takes unfair advantage, always tells the truth, must help people in distress, and is a patriot



The most often-portrayed western heroes on screen have been (in descending order): William Frederick Cody ("Buffalo Bill"), William Bonney ("Billy the Kid"), Jesse James, Wild Bill Hickok, Gen. George A. Custer, and Wyatt Earp.

Silent Westerns:

The western was among the first film genres, growing in status alongside the development of Hollywood's studio production system. There were only a few great silent westerns, although the best ones established some of the archetypes that are part of the genre even today. The earliest westerns (silent films without the sound of gunfire, horse's hoofbeats, and the cattle trail) are gems of American history.

The earliest cowboy films were Thomas Edison's **Cripple Creek Bar Room Scene (1898)** and **Poker at Dawson City (1898)**, followed by Edison's publicity film **Romance of the Rails (1902)** (made by Edison's cameraman Edwin S. Porter). Other early westerns copyrighted by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Co. were the 21-minute long **Kit Carson (1903)** and the 15-minute **The Pioneers (1903)**.

Edwin S. Porter's Pioneering Western:



But the 'first real movie' or commercially narrative film that gave birth to the genre was Edwin S. Porter's pioneering western **The Great Train Robbery (1903)**. Porter (named 'the father of the story film') was responsible for the one-reel, 10-minute long film, shot - curiously - on the East Coast (New Jersey and Delaware) rather than the Western setting of Wyoming. [The *first* westerns were shot, until 1906, on the East Coast. The first western produced in the West was Biograph's **A California Hold Up (1906)**.]

Almost all the essential elements or conventions of typical westerns were included: good guys vs. bad guys, a robbery or wrong-doing, a chase or pursuit, and a final showdown, all in a natural setting. The film ended (or began) with a stunning close-up (the first!) of a gunman (George Barnes) firing directly into the camera - and audience. It was the most commercially successful film of the pre-nickelodeon era.

Porter's film was a milestone in film-making for its storyboarding of the script, the first use of title cards, an ellipsis, and a panning shot, and for its cross-cutting editing techniques. One of its stars with multiple roles, Gilbert M. Anderson (Max Aronson), later took the name "Broncho Billy" Anderson and became famous as the *first* western film hero - the genre's first cowboy. As in other genres, westerns quickly became character-driven and stars began to be developed.



Porter's other film in the same year was a non-Western, **Life of An American Fireman (1903)** featuring more overlapping action and cross-cut editing, and a last-minute rescue of a mother and child in a burning building. And Edison's **A Race for Millions (1907)** also featured typical western plot elements - a high-noon shootout, and claim-jumping. In fact, a number of major film studios were making westerns as early as 1907, and by the end of the first decade of the century, about twenty percent of all of Hollywood's films were westerns.

Other Early Westerns and Their Directors/Producers:

D. W. Griffith dabbled in silent westerns at Biograph Studios, producing such pictures as:

- **Last Drop of Water (1911)**, with the western's first characteristic scenes of a wagon train siege and a cavalry rescue
- the innovatively-filmed **Fighting Blood (1911)** about conflict between white settlers and Sioux Indians in the Dakota territory of 1899
- **The Battle of Elderbush Gulch (1914)**, a two-reel pre-cursor to his most (in)famous landmark film, ★ **Birth of a Nation (1915)**

The *first* feature-length western was Lawrence B. McGill's six-reel **Arizona (1913)**. Young Cecil B. De

Mille's *first* motion picture was **The Squaw Man (1914)**, usually credited as the *first* feature filmed entirely in Hollywood. [De Mille remade the film in 1918 and 1931.] Even in the early days of the film industry, some real-life cowboys and legendary western figures appeared in films:

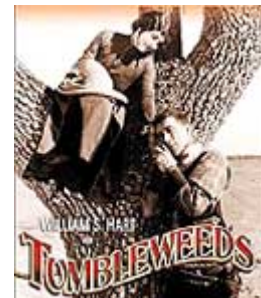
- Wyatt Earp in **The Half-Breed (1919)**
- Buffalo Bill Cody in **The Adventures of Buffalo Bill (1917)**

Thomas Ince (1882-1924), known for inventing the studio system, was the first studio executive who embraced the western in the teen years. He arrived in California in 1911, where he produced detailed scripts with new situations and characters for a vast number of classic westerns. In 1912, his Bison Company production studios (known as Inceville) purchased the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch and the Wild West Show to use their props and performers for his assembly-line, mass-produced films. In the early 1910s, famed director John Ford's older brother Francis was directing and starring in westerns in California for producer Ince, before joining Universal and Carl Laemmle in 1913.

William S. Hart: The First Westerns Super-Star of the Silent Era

Ince was responsible for discovering and bringing Shakespearean actor William S. Hart (1870-1946) to prominent stardom by signing him up in his New York Motion Picture Company. Hart served as both actor and director after moving to Hollywood, and was often portrayed as a "good bad man" on the screen (with his Pinto pony named Fritz). He emerged as one of the greatest Western heroes in the mid-1910s, until the release of his last film in 1925:

- **The Disciple (1915)**
- **The Taking of Jim McLane (1915)**
- **Devil's Double (1916)**
- **Hell's Hinges (1916)**
- **The Return of Draw Egan (1916)**
- **Truthful Tulliver (1916)**
- **The Narrow Trail (1917)**, Hart's first feature production for Paramount
- **Branding Broadway (1918)**, set in modern-day New York City!
- **Riddle Gawne (1918)**
- **Breed of Men (1919)**
- **The Money Corral (1919)**
- **Sand (1920)**, reportedly Pres. Woodrow Wilson's favorite Hart film
- **The Testing Block (1920)**
- **The Toll Gate (1920)**, Hart's first film with his own production company
- **The Three Word Brand (1921)**, with Hart playing three roles
- **White Oak (1921)**
- **Travelin' On (1922)**
- **Wild Bill Hickok (1923)**
- **Singer Jim McKee (1924)**
- **Tumbleweeds (1925)**, Hart's best-known and greatest western, by director King Baggot and from UA - about the Cherokee Strip (Oklahoma) Gold Rush; the film's title referred to a breed of roaming cowboys



More Early Westerns Stars:

Early westerns provided theater owners with second features and steady work for a countless stable of actors. During the earliest, pre-sound period of the westerns (the teens and the 20s) and into the 30s, the elderly William S. Hart was soon replaced by other more glamorous, swaggering, and action-oriented western stars of the primitive B-films:

- Gilbert M. "Broncho Billy" Anderson (1881-1971) - the genre's *first* western film hero and star, who made about 400 "Broncho Billy" westerns, beginning with **Broncho Billy and the Baby (1910)**; his last *silent* western role was in **The Son of a Gun (1919)**
- Tom Mix (a prototypical western action hero with a wholesome screen persona, and his horse Tony, a prominent star for Fox films), he often produced and directed his own films, and first appeared in Selig Polyscope's **The**

Man From Texas (1915) and **The Heart of Texas Ryan (1916)**, and later in such expensive features as Fox's **Riders of the Purple Sage (1925)** (from Zane Grey's 1912 melodrama of the same name) and **The Great K & A Train Robbery (1926)**; also, he was an accomplished rodeo horseman/cowboy who performed most of his own stunts

- Harry Carey, often featured as the frontiersman character Cheyenne Harry (Carey was the lead in twenty-four John Ford silents); toward the end of his film career, he played the lead in William Christy Cabanne's **The Last Outlaw (1936)**, based on an original story by John Ford (who directed a silent version in 1919)
- Hoot Gibson, who usually performed supporting roles in the Ford-Carey western films at Universal, and became a major star in the 1920s
- Buck Jones
- Tim McCoy
- Ken Maynard
- Tim Holt
- George O'Brien
- Bill Elliott
- Charles Starrett
- Johnny Mack Brown

Westerns were among the slowest of the film genres to mature although with the coming of sound, they achieved fuller development. From the early 1920s, many westerns were unsophisticated, inexpensively-made, low quality, action-packed B-pictures from Poverty Row studios (predominantly Republic Studios), filled with familiar stock footage, often the bottom half of a double bill in feature-length and Saturday-matinee serial formats, although some of the early 40's westerns were A-budget films regarding social issues (e.g., **The Ox-Bow Incident (1943)**). The *first* feature-length color western was the Zane Grey horse opera from Famous Players-Lasky, **Wanderer of the Wasteland (1924)**.

The Silent Western Epic:



Notably, the *first* big-scale epic film of the silent era was also a western, James Cruze's landmark and highly successful **The Covered Wagon (1923)**, an expensive effort which cost \$800,000 yet brought \$4 million at the box-office. This feature-length western from Paramount was the historical drama of a wagon train in the mid-1800s moving westward, encountering harsh environmental and weather conditions (a river crossing and prairie fire), and of course, hostile Indians. Hollywood was encouraged to produce many more westerns in subsequent years.

Its success led to another silent western tale of the building of the American empire by the construction of the Union and Central Pacific RRs - famed western director John Ford's silent railroad classic epic **The Iron Horse (1924)** for Fox films - his 50th film. It was shot almost entirely on location in the Nevada desert, and used real-life, original props (such as Wild Bill Hickok's vest-pocket Colt Deringer revolver). One of Paramount's *last* silent westerns was director Victor Schertzinger's tale of culture clash titled **Redskin (1929)** - a good-intentioned follow-up to the earlier epic western, director George Seitz' Zane Grey tale **The Vanishing American (1925)**. It was partially shot in two-strip Technicolor, with white actor Richard Dix again in the role of college-educated Navajo Indian Wing Foot. Although the casting was such, it was the *last* Hollywood feature for two decades to take a sympathetic look into Native American culture. After another of Ford's silent epics, **Three Bad Men (1926)**, it would be another thirteen years before Ford's next western classic, ★ **Stagecoach (1939)**.

Accolades for Early Westerns:

Warner Baxter won a Best Actor Academy Award as the Cisco Kid ("the Robin Hood of the Old West") in Fox-Movietone's **In Old Arizona (1928/9)**, noted as the *first* sound Western produced by a major studio. [This was the film during which co-director Raoul Walsh lost an eye.] The Best Picture Academy Award winner in the 1930/31 ceremony was RKO's and Wesley Ruggles' **Cimarron (1931)**, an epic tale based on Edna Ferber's tale of the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889, with a young Irene Dunne and Richard Dix. The big-budget, somewhat dated film opened with a spectacular Oklahoma run sequence, requiring thousands of extras, herds of livestock, and dozens of cameramen for its success. [For many years, it was the only western ever to win the Best Picture honor - until two 90s winners: **Dances with Wolves (1990)** and **Unforgiven (1992)**.]



30's Low-Budget 'Singing' Cowboy Films with Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, and More:



During this time period, shorter, light-hearted, low-budget, non-violent B-Westerns, called *singing*

cowboy films, highlighted the musical and singing talents of its stars in addition to gunslinging. The first musical western that introduced the singing cowboy to the screen was **Montana Moon (1930)**, with an early role for young starlet Joan Crawford.

"King of the Cowboys" Gene Autry soon became the top moneymaker of the cowboy stars of the mid-to-late 1930s and early 1940s, after pioneering the *Singing Cowboy* movie formula with the newly-formed Republic Pictures. His debut was in the popular film **In Old Santa Fe (1934)**, and his first starring western was **Tumbling Tumbleweeds (1935)**. Other singing stars, including Tex Ritter, Bob Baker, Dick Foran, Jimmy Wakely, "Smiley" Burnette, Eddie Dean, Rex Allen, black singing cowboy Herb Jeffries, and Bing Crosby, often played themselves and became cultural icons, in such forgettable films as:

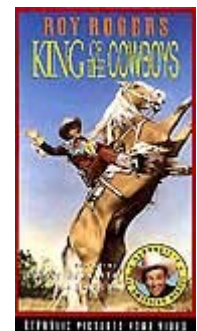
- **Moonlight on the Prairie (1935)** and **Song of the Saddle (1936)** with Dick Foran
- Joseph Kane's **Ride, Ranger, Ride (1936)** with Gene Autry
- **Song of the Gringo (1936)**, featuring the screen debut of Tex Ritter
- **Rhythm of the Saddle (1938)**, another Gene Autry musical western

The country-western singing group *Sons of the Pioneers* would often perform within the many films, making their film debut in Norman Taurog's **Rhythm on the Range (1936)** (Bing Crosby's *only* Western!).

One of the most successful of all the singing cowboys was William 'Hopalong Cassidy' Boyd (who appeared in almost seventy films between 1935 and 1952) - he went on to a starring role in a long-running TV series. Hopalong ("Hoppy") Cassidy was always dressed in black (unlike most B-western heroes).

Gene Autry's Successor: Roy Rogers

Roy Rogers, previously a member of the Sons of the Pioneers (when he was named Leonard Slye) became a movie-star in the late 30s for Republic Pictures after appearing in many bit roles. He succeeded Gene Autry as 'The King of the Cowboys' during the 1940s (and was often seen with his horse Trigger, sidekick Gabby Hayes, and future wife Dale Evans), performing in **King of the Cowboys (1943)** and in director William Witney's **Home in Oklahoma (1947)**, one of his best films. By the late 40s and early 50s, Autry, Rogers, and Boyd had all moved to the new entertainment medium - television.



1930s Westerns Talkies and Their Stars:

In 1930s and 40s westerns, many well-known acting stars got their start. Gary Cooper starred in an early talkie - Paramount's first sound western by director Victor Fleming titled **The Virginian (1929)**, known for its famous western phrase: "When you call me that, smile." John Wayne gained his acting experience during the 1930s in dozens of B westerns. "John Wayne" (born as Marion Robert and later given the nickname "Duke" after the family dog, and the full name of Marion Michael Morrison) was first discovered by director John Ford when he appeared as an extra in the silent war drama **Four Sons (1928)**.



Ford recommended Wayne to Raoul Walsh, who cast the twenty-two year-old actor in his *first* starring role as a wagon train scout in the *first* sound-era epic western about an 1840s Missouri-to-Oregon wagon trail journey - **The Big Trail (1930)**, but it was not a breakthrough film for Wayne (that wouldn't occur until his role in Ford's *Stagecoach (1939)* - see below). The \$2 million production was filmed in both 35mm and in an early, revolutionary wide-screen 70 mm process called *Grandeur*, but proved to be a financial disaster at the box-office. It was a remake of the classic silent western **The Covered Wagon (1923)** mentioned earlier.

Other stars in westerns were Wallace Beery who memorably portrayed a Mexican revolutionary in **Viva Villa! (1934)**, Barbara Stanwyck (in her first-ever western) as the famous markswoman in George Stevens' fictionalized **Annie Oakley (1935)** - the director's first western, and Randolph Scott in an early large-scale version of the French and Indian War (during America's colonial period) in the film adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's **The Last of the Mohicans (1936)**. Producer/director Cecil B. De Mille's stylish but historically imaginative **The Plainsman (1937)** starred Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur as Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane respectively, attracting a wider audience. The film impressively recreated the Battle of the Little Big Horn, shot on location in Montana with thousands of Native-Americans as extras. Two years later, DeMille filmed a spectacular version of the building of the transcontinental railroad, **Union Pacific (1939)**.



Republic's 'Three Mesquiteers' Series: 1936-1943

After obtaining the rights in 1936, Republic Studios delivered a series of Westerns adapted from William Colt MacDonald's "Three Mesquiteers" novels (specifically *Law of the 45's* (1935)), about a trio of wandering Western heroes. The successful series eventually lasted eight years and included 51 films. The original trio consisted of Tucson Smith (Ray 'Crash' Corrigan), Stony Brooke (Bob Livingston, later replaced for awhile by Ralph Byrd), and comic sidekick Lullaby Joslin (Sid Saylor, replaced by Max Terhune in the second film). Future western star John Wayne portrayed Stony Brooke in eight *Mesquiteer* features in 1938-1939. Some of the films' titles, most of which were 1-hour two-reelers, were:



- **The Three Mesquiteers (1936)** - the first in the series
- **The Three Mesquiteers: Hit the Saddle (1937)**
- **The Three Mesquiteers: Heroes of the Saddle (1940)**
- **The Three Mesquiteers: Trail Blazers (1940)**
- **Riders of the Rio Grande (1943)** - the last in the series

A Classic Western: Stagecoach (1939)



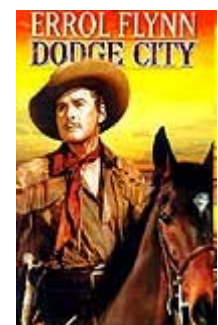
At the end of the 1930s, director John Ford's landmark classic ★ [Stagecoach \(1939\)](#) about a stagecoach journey across Apache country marked a turning point. He had created a new kind of western film with standard B-picture action, epic scope, *and* the film had an intelligent emphasis on character and mood. This great mythic film transformed the western into A-film status. It was also Ford's *first* sound western. It was his first western since his silent western **Three Bad Men (1926)**, since Ford had avoided the genre for over a decade. The film was written by Dudley Nichols, from the story *The Stage to Lordsburg* by Ernest Haycox.

With B-western stalwart John Wayne as Ringo Kid, a vengeful but noble gunslinger, Ford helped to make him a full-fledged charismatic, western star. [Wayne also appeared in another historical western adventure in the same year called **Allegheny Uprising (1939)**, and in a few *Mesquiteer* films (see above).]

Stagecoach had a formative and regenerative influence on all future westerns, raising the stature of 30's B-Westerns for years to come by concentrating on the film's characters. It was skillfully composed of traditional action/chase sequences, the introduction of the beautiful, sweeping expanses of Monument Valley, and polarized, intelligent dialogue among clashing characters and personalities (a *Grand Hotel*-like assemblage including a sheriff and cowardly driver, with their passengers: a drunken doctor (a Best Supporting Actor Oscar-winning role for Thomas Mitchell), a whiskey drummer, an unscrupulous bank executive, a prostitute with a heart of gold, a pregnant, Eastern-bred lady and a genteel gambler). Its-crisply edited Indian chase sequence across salt flats was thrillingly-made, and it had a decisive quote to end it: "Saved from the blessings of civilization". It was the first of seven films he made in the famed western Monument Valley.

Westerns in the Early 1940s:

The 1940s and 50s were to soon become the heyday of the *classic* film western - and director John Ford was considered the major craftsman of the western genre during the sound era. However, there were others that also contributed to the genre's success. King Vidor's great historical-adventure saga of colonial America, **Northwest Passage (1940)** starred Spencer Tracy as the leader of Roger's Rangers, battling Indians for territory - an anti-Native American picture. The *first* Western shot in color in Monument Valley was David Miller's **Billy the Kid (1941)**.



Swashbuckler star Errol Flynn starred in three Michael Curtiz-directed, big-scale adventure westerns of the late 30s and early 40s for Warner Bros., displaying his athleticism and romantic appeal as a post-Civil War Texas cattleman in **Dodge City (1939)** with one of the best bar-room brawls ever filmed, and as an ex-Union officer in **Virginia City (1940)**. In his third western, Flynn starred as cavalry officer Jeb Stuart chasing abolitionist John Brown (Raymond Massey) in **Santa Fe Trail (1940)** (with Ronald Reagan as General George A. Custer), and then he portrayed the flamboyant General Custer in an historically inaccurate biography from director Raoul Walsh, the romanticized **They Died With Their Boots On (1941)**. In three of these four western films, his romantic interest was played by Olivia de Havilland. Flynn's last on-screen teaming with De Havilland (of their eight films together) was in their 1941 film.

John Ford's Westerns in the Late 30s and 40s:



Ford also offered up other films in 1939 with emphasis on action and character: **Young Mr. Lincoln (1939)** with Henry Fonda in the title role, and **Drums Along the Mohawk (1939)**, a film about upstate New York settlers (Henry Fonda and Claudette Colbert) facing the trials of living on the frontier during the Revolutionary War period.



After World War II, John Ford returned to the western icons of his beloved Monument Valley and filmed his dark version of the OK Corral shootout (between the Earps and Clantons) in the stunning classic ★ **My Darling Clementine (1946)** again with Henry Fonda (as Wyatt Earp) and with Victor Mature (as Doc Holliday). The film adaptation, written by Samuel G. Engel, Sam Hellman and

Winston Miller, was based on the book *Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal* by Stuart N. Lake, and proved to be another western film milestone. (There were at least five other sound films with the same subject matter, Wyatt Earp in Tombstone, before Ford canonized the tale.)

Ford's Cavalry Films - Trilogy:

In the late 1940s, John Ford also explored other possibilities for westerns and created a famous 'so-called' trilogy of western 'cavalry' films, noted for their glorious landscapes of Arizona's Monument Valley and their affectionate and militaristic perspective on the winning of the West by overtaking the Indians:

- **Fort Apache (1948)**, with Henry Fonda as an arrogant, Indian-hating lieutenant
- **She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949)**, an autumnal western in which John Wayne played a retirement-age cavalry captain named Nathan Brittles, who prevents a large-scale Indian uprising following the Battle of the Little Big Horn; noted for Winton C. Hoch's beautiful Oscar-winning cinematography (the film's sole nomination and win); this was Ford's personal favorite of the trilogy
- **Rio Grande (1950)**

By the end of his career, John Ford had made fifteen sound Westerns, and numerous silent westerns. The prolific Henry Fonda would eventually star in 8 John Ford films, and 21 westerns in total.

Other Well-Received Westerns:

There were many other westerns in 1939 and the 40s, some of which were grade A-westerns with strong character emphasis and greater maturity, including:

- Zanuck's fictionalized, glamourized, big budget film **Jesse James (1939)**, directed by Henry King, with Henry Fonda as Frank James
- William Wyler's entertaining saga **The Westerner (1940)** with Walter Brennan (who won a record-setting third Academy Award for his role) and Gary Cooper
- the somber, thought-provoking indictment of mob rule in William A. Wellman's noirish **The Ox-Bow Incident (1943)** - starring Henry Fonda and Harry Morgan as drifters who attempted to prevent the lynching of three innocent men



Sex-Westerns:



Two 40s westerns were infamous sex-westerns, both salaciously marketed to full effect. Millionaire director/producer Howard Hughes' B-grade **The Outlaw (1943)** was notorious for leering camera views of Jane Russell's ample cleavage. The storyline, the pursuit of Billy the Kid by Sheriff Pat Garrett (Thomas Mitchell), with Russell as Doc Holliday's (Walter Huston) sexy, half-breed mistress Rio (with an oft-unbuttoned, low-cut peasant blouse), was considered too racy for contemporary audiences in 1941 and postponed until 1943 for limited release. After a ten-week run, Hughes shelved the film for three years after which it was finally placed in general release in 1946 (in a cut version).

And the ambitious production [Duel in the Sun \(1946\)](#) from producer and credited scriptwriter David O. Selznick was a "Gone With The Wind"- type western. This lurid Technicolor western, directed by King Vidor (who quit and was one of eight directors and cinematographers), was a sprawling melodramatic saga of sexual longing that was forced to cut nine minutes of its content before widespread release. It was critically renamed "Lust in the Dust" by its detractors. Jennifer Jones starred as 'half-breed' Pearl caught in a destructive love triangle between the two sons of a cattle baron family (Lionel Barrymore and Lillian Gish) - moderate Joseph Cotten and hot-tempered Gregory Peck. It still remains one of the top box-office westerns - in inflation-adjusted dollars.

John Wayne and Howard Hawks:

Director/producer Howard Hawks worked with John Wayne in four films, the best of which was the realistic cattle drive epic in the genre - the beautifully-photographed black and white ★ [Red River \(1948\)](#). It dramatically told about an historic cattle drive on the Chisholm Trail (the film was the Western equivalent of [Mutiny on the Bounty \(1935\)](#)) from Texas to Abilene, in which Wayne played an obsessive, authoritarian, tough and irrational cattle baron battling his foster son Montgomery Clift. [This was Hawks' first Western, although he had earlier worked - uncredited - on [Viva Villa! \(1934\)](#) and [The Outlaw \(1943\)](#).] [Red River](#) had all the elements of classic westerns: Indian attacks, scenic grandeur, stampedes, romance, and a battle of wills between father and son with John Wayne in an unsympathetic role.



The other magnificent westerns Hawks and Wayne made together included the humorous, action-filled western [Rio Bravo \(1959\)](#) with John Wayne as a tough-guy sheriff (and deliberately filmed as a reaction to [High Noon](#)), [El Dorado \(1967\)](#), and [Rio Lobo \(1970\)](#). [Rio Bravo \(1959\)](#) teamed Wayne with a drunken sheriff (Dean Martin) and teenaged sharpshooter (Ricky Nelson - and was remade as John Carpenter's action-thriller [Assault on Precinct 13 \(1976\)](#)).

Film-Noirish Westerns: Mann, Boetticher, and Daves

Elements of the darkish [film noir genre](#) found their way into westerns during the post-war period of the late 1940s and 1950s. Two genuine *noir* westerns, both starring *noir* actor Robert Mitchum, were:

- Raoul Walsh's bleak, Freudian-tinged, stylish and intriguing western psychodrama [Pursued \(1947\)](#); it was similar in theme to Ford's ★ [The Searchers \(1956\)](#), with superbly-brooding cinematography by James Wong Howe and from a script by novelist and screenwriter Niven Busch (known for writing [Duel in the Sun](#) in 1944 that was later made into a film by David O. Selznick as [Duel in the Sun \(1946\)](#), and married to the film's female lead Teresa Wright)
- director Robert Wise's claustrophobic [Blood on the Moon \(1948\)](#)

The most prominent examples of 50s noir Westerns were the series of eight films that teamed actor James Stewart with director Anthony Mann in some of the darkest, adult "psychological westerns" ever made. In Mann's films, the director focused on chilling tales of revenge and the paranoia of a lone, confused, tortured, vengeful western figure played by a darker and obsessive James Stewart:

- [Winchester '73 \(1950\)](#), the first in the series of classic westerns in the 50s - a tale of the relentless pursuit of a gun and revenge sought by Stewart on his brother (who killed their father)
- [Bend of the River \(1952\)](#), the stark and compelling story of the Oregon Trail journey across the country, with Stewart as an ex-outlaw going straight and having to confront his former partner on the opposite side of the law
- the sophisticated and excellent [The Naked Spur \(1953\)](#), a study of compulsive greed for reward money by a self-loathing bounty hunter (Stewart) inspired by the goal of re-purchasing farm land lost during the Civil War, and up against Robert Ryan
- [The Far Country \(1955\)](#), another story of deceit and revenge
- [The Man From Laramie \(1955\)](#), with suspenseful, savage rough action in a murderous feud between two sons of a patriarchal rancher



Budd Boetticher, an often-neglected director of westerns, is best known for his collaboration with western actor Randolph Scott (and screenwriter Burt Kennedy for four efforts marked with * below) in seven, low-budget B-grade westerns between 1956 and 1960, many with appearances by future stars. These gritty, cult classic westerns with lean and simple plots and with small casts were mostly shot in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and included:

1. the psychological western **Seven Men From Now (1956)*** with Randolph Scott as vengeful former sheriff Ben Stride tracking down the seven killers of his wife during a Wells Fargo holdup; also stars Lee Marvin as the central villain
2. **Decision at Sundown (1957)**
3. **The Tall T (1957)***, the story of stagecoach passengers (including Scott and other captives) held by outlaws (led by Richard Boone) - a quintessential "battle of good and evil"
4. **Buchanan Rides Alone (1958)**
5. **Westbound (1958)**
6. the excellent "B" western **Ride Lonesome (1959)***, with Scott as lawman/bounty hunter Ben Brigade competing with others searching for an outlaw/killer; also featured James Coburn in his first film, and Lee Van Cleef
7. **Comanche Station (1960)***; also with Claude Akins

Director Delmer Daves directed the adult western drama **3:10 to Yuma (1957)** from an early Elmore Leonard story - a variation of *High Noon* and *Shane* about a suspenseful wait for the arrival of a train bound for Yuma prison, by a poor rancher (Van Heflin) who holds a notorious gunman (Glenn Ford in a casting role-reversal).



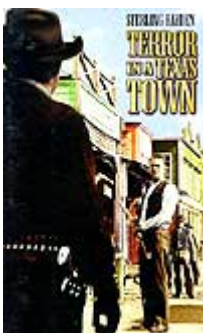
The Comic Western:

Stewart had appeared in only one other western before this time as Thomas Jefferson Destry, Jr., a peace-loving, milk-drinking sheriff in the town of Bottleneck battling crooked Last Chance Saloon owner Brian Donlevy - it was a light, appreciative, humorous spoof of B-grade westerns titled **Destry Rides Again (1939)**, and featured a comeback role for the earthy Marlene Dietrich (in a marathon wrestling match against Una Merkel).

Cult Westerns:

Other directors incorporated noirish or cultish elements into their 1950s 'non-Western' westerns. German director Fritz Lang made three exceptional westerns from 1940-1952, all of which were in Technicolor. The first film, made in the early 40s, still suffered from the restrictions of the Hays Code requiring that a bad man couldn't be a hero, so Fonda's character was made to be more saintly and less brutal than the film required:

- **The Return of Frank James (1940)**, a superior sequel to Henry King's and Fox's popular **Jesse James (1939)**, with Henry Fonda reprising his role as Jesse's brother Frank and featuring the film debut of Gene Tierney as a reporter; this was Lang's first color film, and his first Western
- the big-budget feature for Fox, **Western Union (1941)**, with Robert Young and Randolph Scott - Lang's second Technicolor film and second western, a fictional story against the backdrop of the achievement of installing WU telegraph wires between Omaha and Salt Lake City at the start of the Civil War
- **Rancho Notorious (1952)**, the last of Lang's three westerns, featuring Marlene Dietrich and Mel Ferrer in a quirky, dream-like revenge western



Nicholas Ray's astonishing one-of-a-kind camp cult classic **Johnny Guitar (1954)** starred Joan Crawford and Mercedes McCambridge who shoot it out in the film's bloody finale. Similarly, maverick director Samuel Fuller's female-centric cult-western **Forty Guns (1957)** (originally titled *The Woman with the Whip*) featured Barbara Stanwyck as the whip-wielding matriarch of Tombstone, sexual innuendo, and imaginative, visceral camerawork. And Joseph Lewis' final feature film, the off-beat, low-budget, black and white cult film **Terror in a Texas Town (1958)** starred the rugged Sterling Hayden as a Scandinavian whaler who was armed with a harpoon in a showdown against a black-clad gunman. And sci-fi writer/director Michael Crichton's **Westworld (1973)**, his first theatrical feature (and a precursor to Spielberg's Jurassic Park), told a futuristic story of a remote 'Disneyland Western Theme Park for Adults' where the mechanical cyborgs (one of which was a gunslinging Yul Brynner) developed serious malfunctions. The film inspired the cheap sequel **Futureworld (1976)** with Peter Fonda and Blythe Danner, and a TV series *Beyond Westworld*.

Early Television Westerns Shows:

When television took its toll on western screen entertainment in the late 50s, the B-



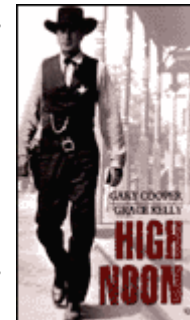
pictures transferred themselves to the small screen throughout much of the 50s and into the 60s. The Golden Age of the B Western, with low-budget, B-picture horse operas, was coming to an end. The TV Western resembled the second film features in theatre palaces in the 1930s and 1940s, with shows such as:

- **The Cisco Kid (from 1950-1956)**, featuring Duncan Renaldo as the heroic Cisco, and Leo Carrillo as his sidekick Pancho; Diablo and Loco were their horses
- **The Lone Ranger (from 1949-1957)**, starring Clayton Moore as John Reid (the Lone Ranger) with his horse Silver, and Jay Silverheels as Tonto, his faithful, full-blooded Mohawk sidekick
- **The Roy Rogers Show (from 1951-1957)**, starring Roy Rogers (King of the Cowboys) with Trigger, Dale Evans (Queen of the West) with Buttermilk, Pat Brady as the sidekick and his jeep Nellybelle, and Roy's dog Bullet
- **Wild Bill Hickok (from 1951-1958)**, with Guy Madison (as "Wild Bill") and his horse Buckshot, and Andy Devine as Deputy Marshal Jingles P. Jones and his horse Joker
- **Hopalong Cassidy (from 1951-1952)**, with William Boyd as Bill "Hoppy" Cassidy, on his Bar 20 Ranch, with horse Topper and sidekick Red Connors (Edgar Buchanan)
- **Death Valley Days (from 1952-1975)** with various co-hosts including Stanley Andrews, Ronald Reagan, Dale Robertson, and Robert Taylor

[Clayton Moore's first film with a mask - a full one - was in the film **The Ghost of Zorro (1949)**, a feature version of the Republic Films serial. Moore's casting led to his subsequent participation in the long-running TV series.] The black-masked man, with a hearty "Hi-yo Silver" and silver bullets, appeared in almost 170 episodes of **The Lone Ranger** for television - and in two feature films. Because of the popularity of the TV show and its "return to the thrilling days of yesteryear," **The Lone Ranger (1956)**, a full-length, color feature film was released by Warner Bros, with Moore and Silverheels reprising their TV roles. Their other feature film came out two years later, **The Lone Ranger and the Lost City of Gold (1958)**. These popular TV programs were later joined by such long-lasting TV series as: **Gunsmoke**, **Rawhide**, **Bonanza**, **The Virginian**, **The Wild Wild West**, **Have Gun Will Travel**, and **Wyatt Earp**. A short-lived ABC-TV series in the mid-60s, titled *Shane* with David Carradine as the frontier gunfighter, was based on the classic film ★ [Shane \(1953\)](#).

More Classic Westerns:

More excellent adult westerns of the late 1940s and 1950s with classic character studies include William Wellman's [The Ox-Bow Incident \(1943\)](#) with Henry Fonda, and John Huston's adventure tale of greed ★ [The Treasure of the Sierra Madre \(1948\)](#). These two pictures were the only Western films to receive Academy Award nominations for Best Picture in the 1940s. **The Gunfighter (1950)** told the story of notorious world-weary gunman Jimmy Ringo, played by Gregory Peck.



One of the best was the landmark classic, dramatic morality tale of an abandoned lawman, carefully filmed in "real-time." It was director Fred Zinnemann's only western, ★ [High Noon \(1952\)](#). The minimalist script written by Carl Foreman (who was blacklisted during the 50s' anti-Communist hearings) was a political allegory of 50s McCarthyism. In an Academy Award-winning performance, Gary Cooper played the part of just-married (to Grace Kelly), aging small-town Marshal Kane who heroically stood up to four vengeful, gunslinging killers without assistance from the townsfolk that he had defended for his entire career. This paralleled the historical incident of the early 50s' House Committee on Un-American Activities' witch-hunt for Communists in Hollywood, and indicted those who deserted their friends.

Another 'guilt-by-suspicion' allegorical film masking as a criticism of the McCarthy era, Allan Dwan's psychological low-budget western **Silver Lode (1954)**, was set during a July 4th celebration in a frontier town. It told about the tense hunt for the wrongly-accused town sheriff Dan Ballard (John Payne) on his wedding day to fiancée Rose Evans (Lizabeth Scott), by bad guy Ned McCarthy (Dan Duryea) and his deputies -- a clear reference to Sen. Joseph McCarthy. The climactic confrontational scene in the church belltower ended with antagonist McCarthy's death and the eventual clearing of Ballard's name.



The traditional, quintessential story of good vs. bad (civilization vs. lawlessness) was also highlighted in George Stevens' gorgeously-filmed sole western, ★ [Shane \(1953\)](#) with an extremely accurate portrayal of pioneer life. Actor Alan Ladd portrayed a mysterious, gunslinger/drifter, the archetypal Western hero, who joined the struggle of

the civilizing community of homesteaders against the cattlemen. In the end, the title character - forever branded as a killer, rode off toward the mountains after accomplishing his task of bringing normalcy back to the area.

Hollywood would often mix fact with fiction and prejudicial bias in its westerns. Delmer Daves' revisionist western **Broken Arrow (1950)**, however, was considered the *first* Hollywood picture to seriously take the side of the Indians (Native-Americans) and emphasize peaceful co-existence, with a sympathetic portrayal of Apache chief Cochise (by white actor Jeff Chandler with a Best Supporting Actor nomination - it was his first of three films as the Indian chief), and Debra Paget as Indian maiden Sonseeahray. This film also marked the beginning of James Stewart's post-war work as a western character. [*Broken Arrow* became a TV series in the mid-50s.] **Pony Express (1953)** was a quasi-historical account of the extension of the mail route with western legends Buffalo Bill Cody (Charlton Heston) and Wild Bill Hickok (Forrest Tucker). Another Charlton Heston western, titled **Arrowhead (1953)** expressed a biased view of Indians and starred Jack Palance as an Apache chief.



Robert Enrico's Oscar-winning, dialogue-less, 28-minute short **La Riviere du Hibou (1962)** was a French adaptation based on Ambrose Bierce's 1891 story 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'. The Civil War western story with a twist-ending, about an innocent man who seemed to escape from death by a hangman's noose, became well-known when shown to a large American audience as an edited and narrated episode (the final episode!) of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* television show in 1964.

Wide-Screen Westerns:

To combat the decline of the film western, wide-screen frontier epics in the 50s and early 60s appeared, emphasizing the western frontier and expansion. Representative films included:

- Howard Hawks' second western **The Big Sky (1952)**, a sprawling 1830s keelboat expedition adventure with Kentucky frontiersmen (Kirk Douglas and Dewey Martin) on the Missouri River
- director John Farrow's stereoscopic, partially 3-D **Hondo (1953)** starring John Wayne and Geraldine Page (in her screen debut)
- director Robert Aldrich's Superscope **Vera Cruz (1954)** teaming Burt Lancaster and Gary Cooper during the Mexican Revolution of 1866
- director Edward Dmytryk's Deluxcolor **Broken Lance (1954)**, a western *King Lear* with Spencer Tracy, that won a Best Original Story Academy Award, and a Best Supporting Actress nomination for Katy Jurado
- even a conventional drama such as John Sturges' **Bad Day at Black Rock (1955)** used a classic Western setting and plot-line and updated them to modern-day circumstances, bringing additional suspense to the story with the use of widescreen. Spencer Tracy as a one-armed, lone passenger dressed in black arrives in a deserted western town by train to learn about a town's dark secret
- William Wyler's big-budget, star-studded and sprawling **The Big Country (1958)** with Gregory Peck as an Eastern sea captain caught in the midst of a Western ranching and water rights feud between his fiancée's father (Charles Bickford) and their neighbor (Burl Ives)
- John Wayne as Davy Crockett in the lengthy action-epic **The Alamo (1960)**, Wayne's directorial debut film (although some of it was directed by John Ford) - an effort that failed at the box-office although it was nominated for six Academy Awards (due to insistent and somewhat annoying Oscar campaigning); the film was remade over 40 years later as **The Alamo (2004)**, with Billy Bob Thornton filling in for the Duke's musket-wielding Davy Crockett
- the widescreen Cinerama film **How The West Was Won (1963)**, a tremendous, star-studded three-generation story of pioneers



John Sturges' Two Western Blockbusters:

Sturges' **Gunfight at the OK Corral (1957)** told the story of Marshal Wyatt Earp (Burt Lancaster) in Tombstone, Arizona feuding with the Clantons and their hired guns -- with its inevitable showdown in 1888, aided by the gunfire of rum-soaked Dr. John 'Doc' Holliday (Kirk Douglas). His next popular film, **The Magnificent Seven (1960)** rewrote a Japanese classic about Samurai warrior-swordsmen that



defended a 14th century village (Akira Kurosawa's **The Seven Samurai (1954)** . This updated 'remake,' featuring a memorable, Oscar-nominated score by Elmer Bernstein, starred these seven gun-slinging American outlaws who defended Mexican peasants against bandit leader Eli Wallach:

- Yul Brynner
- Steve McQueen
- knife-thrower James Coburn
- wood-cutter Charles Bronson
- Robert Vaughn
- Horst Bulchholz
- Brad Dexter

[It was followed by three inferior sequels: **Return of the Seven (1966)**, **Guns of the Magnificent Seven (1969)**, and **The Magnificent Seven Ride! (1972)**.] One of the most exciting action-adventure westerns of all time was writer/director Richard Brooks' big-budget ensemble western **The Professionals (1966)**, with Lee Marvin as the leader of a group of mercenaries (including explosives expert Burt Lancaster, horsemen Robert Ryan, and tracker/longbow expert Woody Strode) into Mexico on a dangerous mission to rescue a wealthy industrialist's ransomed wife (Claudia Cardinale) from Mexican rebel kidnappers (headed by Jack Palance).

John Wayne: The Archetypal Western Hero (or Anti-Hero)

John Wayne, towering and dominant, remains the most popular and durable of the major western film stars of the modern era. [Other western stars also included Henry Fonda, Clint Eastwood, Randolph Scott, James Stewart, Joel McCrea, and Gary Cooper.] In Wayne's many films, he embodied the great American hero and forever closely identified with the genre. A short summary of his films shows how deeply ingrained he was within the western film.



Nine years after his first western **The Big Trail (1930)**, Wayne further developed his western persona in ★ **Stagecoach (1939)**, and then performed in a series of action-packed WWII pictures in the early to mid-40s. He reappeared in Howard Hawks' epic of a mutinous cattle drive ★ **Red River (1948)**, and in John Ford's cavalry trilogy (see above). Wayne also starred in his best Western (anti-hero) role in probably the best Hollywood Western ever made - John Ford's ★ **The Searchers (1956)**, one of the few westerns which has consistently won praise as a work of art. [It has inspired other directors and their non-Western films, from ★ **Taxi Driver (1976)** to ★ **Star Wars (1977)**.] The *VistaVision* film, shot in Monument Valley, portrayed Wayne as a racist, hate-driven, and lonely outsider relentlessly and obsessively searching over a period of years for his Comanche-kidnapped niece (played by a young Natalie Wood).

John Ford memorably united two major stars of the genre in his last great film, the excellent adult western **The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)**, John Wayne and James Stewart -- and also Lee Marvin as 'Liberty Valance' (shot by Stewart). Its byword was "When the Legend Becomes Fact, Print the Legend." In the 60's, Wayne also acted in Andrew McLaglen's comedy western **McLintock! (1963)** (a battle-of-the-sexes film with Maureen O'Hara), Burt Kennedy's **The War Wagon (1967)** with Kirk Douglas, and Henry Hathaway's **The Sons of Katie Elder (1965)** with Wayne's second co-starring role with Dean Martin.



In later years, Wayne's character aged and matured in such "autumnal" films as Howard Hawks' **El Dorado (1967)** (a remake of Hawks' own **Rio Bravo (1959)** again with Wayne), Henry Hathaway's **True Grit (1969)** in which he finally won a Best Actor Oscar as Rooster Cogburn, a boozy marshal engaged in a track-down, and in its sequel, **Rooster Cogburn (1975)**, with Wayne in an *African Queen*-like role opposite Katharine Hepburn. Two of Wayne's last-day films were Mark Rydell's **The Cowboys (1972)** and Don Siegel's elegiac **The Shootist (1976)**, in which Wayne (in his final film) played a famous gunfighter seeking peace while dying of cancer.

Sam Peckinpah:

Targeted marketing strategies succeeded in highlighting certain special features or sub-genres of western films. In the 1960s, two very different filmmakers refashioned the western in new ways - Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone. In only his second feature film, director Sam Peckinpah brought together two aging and admired iconic western stars, Randolph Scott (in his last movie) and Joel McCrea as two ex-lawmen transporting a gold shipment in the simply-told classic **Ride the High Country (1962)**, an evocative film about the passing of the old West and the difficulty of adapting to changing times at the turn of the century. The movie's most quoted line was paraphrased from the Book of Luke: "All I want is to enter my house justified." The friendship of the older heroes was sorely tested by a younger hotshot gunslinger Heck Longtree (Ron Starr) during their 4-day trip to a mining camp in the high Sierras. This was Peckinpah's transition film from TV to big screen westerns.



Peckinpah made his biggest impact on the evolution of the Western with his Hollywood production of ★ **The Wild Bunch (1969)**, one of the best Westerns ever made - and filmed during the height of the Vietnam War. It was an end-of-the-frontier western set in Mexico in 1913 that followed the exploits of a band of outlaws whose past way of life was slowly being overtaken by mechanization and urbanization (symbolized by the technological inventions flaunted by a brutal Mexican guerrilla leader). Peckinpah's masterpiece was marked with bloody, slow-motion, ultra-violent choreographed ballets of death in its opening and in its finale when the group decides to die. The revolutionary film was a precursor to urban crime thrillers and inner-city gunfighting of the 1970s and later, and was often interpreted as an allegory about the Vietnam War. [Since then, it has inspired dozens of film-makers, including Quentin Tarantino and John Woo.] Peckinpah's revisionist **Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid (1973)** starred James Coburn as sheriff Garrett who tracked down and killed ex-partner/outlaw Billy the Kid (Kris Kristofferson).

Sergio Leone's 'Spaghetti' Westerns:

Italian director Sergio Leone brought many profound changes with his trio of low-budget "spaghetti" western films made in Europe (Spain and Italy) in the mid-60s, but not released in the US until 1967. The changes were a new European, larger-than-life visual style, a harsher, more violent depiction of frontier life, haunting music from Ennio Morricone, choreographed gunfights, wide-screen closeups, and TV's *Rawhide* (Rowdy Yates) star Clint Eastwood as the mysterious, detached, amoral, fearless and cynical gunfighter (dusty, serape-clad, stubbly-faced, and cigar-chewing) and bounty hunter - 'The Man With No Name.' [There were resemblances between Eastwood's characterization and Alan Ladd's gunslinger in ★ **Shane (1953)**.]

The trio of films that demythologized the Old West actually resulted in a revival of the genre in the mid-to-late 1960s:

1. **A Fistful of Dollars (1964)**, with a plot borrowed from Akira Kurosawa's samurai warrior classic **Yojimbo (1961)** and from Dashiell Hammett's crime novel *Red Harvest*; the film inspired Walter Hill's gangster film remake **Last Man Standing (1996)** starring Bruce Willis
2. **For a Few Dollars More (1965)**
3. **The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (1966)** - the best and most ambitious film in the trilogy - the story of a quest for a cache of hidden Confederate gold by three uneasily allied, gritty characters: Clint Eastwood (the good), Lee Van Cleef (the bad), and Eli Wallach (the ugly)



The director's true western epic masterpiece was **Once Upon a Time in the West (1969)**, filmed in John Ford's favored location, Monument Valley. It starred American icon-actor Henry Fonda as its black, villainous murderer, and brought together all the themes, characterizations, and experimental visuals from his previous three films. [The only other film that featured Henry Fonda in a rare villainous role was in Vincent McEveety's **Firecreek (1968)**.]

Clint Eastwood:



During John Wayne's closing years, his popularity in westerns was matched only by Clint Eastwood, who had graduated from CBS-TV's *Rawhide* (from 1959-1966 playing the character of Rowdy Yates) to Italian "spaghetti" westerns and was brought to Hollywood to star in American westerns, first as an actor and then as director (or actor/director). Eastwood developed and broadened his range by appearing in director Ted Post's violent revenge western **Hang 'Em High (1968)**, Eastwood's *first* American film as the star - a film co-produced with his own production company Malpas. Also, in the late 60's, he began his collaborative association with producer/director Don Siegel by appearing in the action cop film **Coogan's Bluff (1968)** - a foreshadowing of his performances as *Dirty Harry*.

High Plains Drifter (1973) was Eastwood's second film as a director (and his first western as

director), where he reprised his "The Man with No Name" character from the "spaghetti" Western sub-genre. He also directed and starred in the excellent revisionistic western epic **The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976)**, (Eastwood's fifth as a director and eighth true Western) - one of his best films in which he portrayed a vengeful hero in pursuit of a villainous Unionist Red Leg soldier. He went on to star as a Wild West Show impresario in **Broncho Billy (1980)** (often not counted as a western), and as a mysterious Preacher in **Pale Rider (1985)** - a film that was inspired by his earlier **High Plains Drifter (1973)**.

Although it was thought that Westerns were experiencing their swan song in the late 1970s and 1980s, Eastwood's award-winning and compelling film **Unforgiven (1992)** became the third western ever to win the Best Picture award. Starring in his 10th western (in addition to producing and directing), Eastwood played the part of William Munny - a retired, once-ruthless outlaw forced to return to harsh violence in a bounty hunt against corrupt sheriff Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) in the town of Big Whiskey. The film de-mythologized elements in the Western genre.



Big Stars in Westerns:



Title roles for big box-office stars in westerns that rewrote the genre were often among the greatest box-office successes. Kirk Douglas starred in the modern cult western **Lonely Are The Brave (1962)**, as Jack Burns - a rugged, individualistic 'last cowboy' who rides through contemporary-day New Mexico, cuts down fences, and is later pursued on horseback by police cars and helicopters led by conflicted lawman Walter Matthau. Its adapted screenplay by blacklisted award-winning Dalton Trumbo was taken from Edward Abbey's novel *The Brave Cowboy: An Old Tale in a New Time*. And aging actor Clark Gable and a burned-out Marilyn Monroe starred together in director John Huston's haunting, modern-day western **The Misfits (1961)** - the last film for the two stars.

Paul Newman starred in **Hud (1963)** and **Hombre (1967)**, and with Robert Redford in George Roy Hill's revisionistic and mildly entertaining **Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969)** as two light-hearted, amiable bank robbers - glamorous members of the legendary 'Hole-in-the-Wall' Gang, who were sought by a relentless posse and fled to Bolivia with an adventurous schoolteacher to become 'Yanqui banditos.' The entertaining film was enhanced by Burt Bacharach's musical score. Like ★ **The Wild Bunch (1969)**, the two are threatened by encroaching civilization - here symbolized by a bicycle, and both meet their destined fate when massacred by a Bolivian army - in freeze-frame. From its seven nominations, the popular film won four Academy Awards and was the highest-grossing western in film history up to that time. Charlton Heston played the title role in director Tom Gries' **Will Penny (1968)** of a fading and aging Western saddle tramp - an exceptional film about the passing of the West.



One of the few attempts to portray Native-American life in a more sympathetic light was found in the realistic depiction of Sioux Indians in the Dakotas in **A Man Called Horse (1970)** with Richard Harris. The British-financed western **Hannie Caulder (1971)**, starring Raquel Welch and Robert Culp, was both a rape-vengeance Western and a comedy. Sexual frankness and gritty authenticity brought audiences to Robert Altman's **McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971)** with Warren Beatty and Julie Christie as a hustler and a hooker respectively. Altman also debunked western myths in his ironic and politically-subversive **Buffalo Bill and The Indians (or Sitting Bull's History Lesson) (1976)** released in the Bi-Centennial year, with Paul Newman as the deconstructed, star-worshipped, mythical figure of show-biz huckster and entrepreneur William F. Cody.

By the end of the 70s decade, John Wayne and many of the master Western film directors of all time had passed away, including John Ford, Howard Hawks, Henry Hathaway, Henry King, Raoul Walsh, and Delmer Daves.

The Decline of Westerns in the 80s:

In the early 1980s, westerns began to seriously decline and disappear from cinema screens with changes in public taste and as memories of the trail-blazing past receded. The tiring, familiar presence of westerns on television and the recognition that the way of life of native Americans was practically annihilated in our past caused the downturn. Oscar-winner Michael Cimino's multi-million dollar failure for United Artists, a detailed, over-long epic western **Heaven's Gate (1980)**, contributed to the genre's weakening.



However, in the mid 1980s and into the 90s, western films experienced something of a comeback, due in part to the boost and the recognition received by two revisionistic, Best Picture westerns:



- **Dances with Wolves (1990)**, a three-hour epic with twelve nominations and seven awards
- **Unforgiven (1992)** with nine nominations and four awards

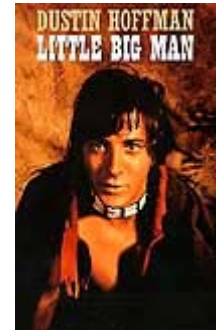
Producer/actor Kevin Costner's box-office and critical success **Dances with Wolves (1990)**, his directorial debut, was noted as one of the few westerns that cast Indians in acting roles, used Lakota Sioux sub-titles, and viewed Native Americans in a sympathetic way and not as blood-thirsty savages. Although the film was officially sanctioned by the Sioux, not all Native American groups were sympathetic to its portrayals.

Revisionist Westerns: Questioning and Rewriting the Western



Director Sam Fuller's revisionist, low-budget B-film **Run of the Arrow (1957)**, often noted as similar to Costner's **Dances With Wolves (1990)** many years later, starred Rod Steiger as a disheartened ex-Confederate soldier who journeyed west, endured a torturous 'run of the arrow' challenge, joined a Sioux Indian tribe, and fell in love with an Indian maiden named Yellow Moccasin (Sarita Montiel, with her voice dubbed by Angie Dickinson). John Ford's redemptive *last* western, **Cheyenne Autumn (1964)** with Richard Widmark and Carroll Baker, dealt with the destruction of the Native-Americans, by portraying the forced, late 1880s westward exodus of Cheyenne Indians from Oklahoma to their tribal lands in Wyoming.

Dustin Hoffman portrayed Jack Crabb - the sole, white, 121 year-old survivor of Custer's Last Stand and the Battle of Little Big Horn in Arthur Penn's **Little Big Man (1970)**, a fable about the expansion of the Old West from an adaptation of Thomas Berger's novel. [According to *Guinness World Records*, the greatest age span portrayed by a movie actor, from 17 to 121, was by 33-year old Hoffman for this role.] Paralleling the Vietnam tragedy, the film demythologized the past and revealed the genocidal atrocities visited upon ethnic Indians by US forces.



A variety of other westerns re-fashioned western themes with greater realism and less romantic and glamorous notions, such as:

- **The Culpepper Cattle Co. (1972)**
- two films about the James-Younger outlaw gang: Philip Kaufman's **The Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid (1972)** and maverick writer/director Walter Hill's **The Long Riders (1980)** with actual siblings acting as clan members
- Lawrence Kasdan's big-budget **Silverado (1985)**, featuring a future all-star cast of then-unlikely Western actors including Kevin Kline, Scott Glenn, Kevin Costner, Danny Glover, and John Cleese; a massive 1999 audience-participation Blockbuster Video poll named it "Most Deserving of a Sequel"
- the contemporary western **Young Guns (1988)**, with a modern version of the Brat Pack in the lead roles
- Hill's **Geronimo: An American Legend (1993)**, a new look at native American Apache leader Geronimo and his conflict with the US cavalry in the mid 1880s
- **Tombstone (1993)** (with Kurt Russell as Wyatt Earp and Val Kilmer as the dying Doc Holliday)
- **Wyatt Earp (1994)** (with Kevin Costner in the title role)
- and Walter Hill's **Wild Bill (1995)** with Jeff Bridges as the legendary western frontier character, revealed in dreamy flashback

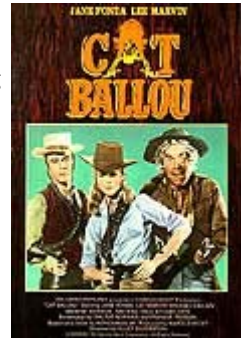


[The exploits of Earp had already appeared in many previous Hollywood films including Ford's ★ **My Darling Clementine (1946)** (with Henry Fonda) and John Sturges' **Gunfight at the OK Corral (1957)** (with Burt Lancaster).]

Other post-classical, revisionist westerns in the mid-90s featured the West from a feminist or African-American perspective such as **The Ballad of Little Jo (1993)** about an ostracized Eastern woman (Suzy Amis) who moved west and disguised herself as a man, **Bad Girls (1994)** about four saloon prostitutes (Madeleine Stowe, Andie MacDowell, Mary Stuart Masterson, and Drew Barrymore), "a star-studded gang of beauties" who bonded together as gunslingers, and director Sam Raimi's 'spaghetti' western **The Quick and the Dead (1995)** that starred Sharon Stone as a vengeful lady gunslinger - a female Clint Eastwood. Mario Van Peebles' exploitative, exciting adventure-western **Posse (1993)** featured black cowboys and revisionist, politically-correct western history.

Western Spoofs and Comedies:

Western parodies and comedies that mocked the genre include director Elliot Silverstein's very successful hit **Cat Ballou (1965)** (with Jane Fonda in the title role, and with Lee Marvin in a dual, Best Actor-winning role), and Mel Brooks' **Blazing Saddles (1974)**. James Garner (of TV's *Maverick* fame of the late 1950s) starred in two western-spoofs in the period: director Burt Kennedy's **Support Your Local Sheriff! (1969)** (that paid homage to previous versions of Wyatt Earp's legendary 'Gunfight at the OK Corral' and *My Darling Clementine*) and its lesser parody sequel **Support Your Local Gunfighter (1971)**. John Wayne appeared in the western comedy **McLintock! (1963)**, featuring a battle-of-the-sexes "Taming of the Shrew" relationship between Wayne and Maureen O'Hara, and including a serious, often-mentioned scene of McIntock breaking up a Native-American lynching.



Another 'western' comedy - **City Slickers (1991)** followed a group of middle-aged buddies embarking on a two-week western cattle drive led by a tough trail cowpoke named Curly (Jack Palance won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for the role). A big-screen, commercially-successful comedy-western, **Maverick (1994)**, a spin-off from a late 50s and early 60s TV series, starred Mel Gibson in the title role as card sharp Bret Maverick, and the original Maverick character (James Garner) as Marshal Zane Cooper. Barry Sonnenfeld's **The Wild Wild West (1999)** was a spin-off from the popular mid-60's TV spy show with **Men in Black's** Will Smith as James T. West and Kevin Kline as Artemus Gordon. Tom Dey's old West spin-off **Shanghai Noon (2000)** featured kung-fu superstar Jackie Chan as Chon Wang - an obvious take-off on John Wayne.



Other Variations on Westerns:

A superb television miniseries, adapted from Larry McMurtry's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, was the classic western saga **Lonesome Dove (1989)**. The eight-hour, four-part miniseries by director Simon Wincer starred Tommy Lee Jones and Robert Duvall as Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call, two aging, cussing ex-Texas Rangers who engage in an adventurous cattle drive over the 2,500 miles from Texas to Montana. [It produced further mini-series sequels, **Return to Lonesome Dove**, **Streets of Laredo**, and **Dead Man's Walk**.] Westerns from a science-fiction point of view included a western-style **Back to the Future, Part III (1990)**. The low-budget **Grim Prairie Tales (1990)** was a supernatural horror-western - an anthology of four scary, unbelievable tales told around an open prairie campfire. Jim Jarmusch's metaphoric, unique, mystical black and white western **Dead Man (1996)** starred Johnny Depp as an 1875 western wanderer (the ghost of poet William Blake?) pursued by bounty-hunters. Kathryn Bigelow's western-noir vampire-horror film **Near Dark (1985)** featured Bill Paxton and Lance Henriksen as members of a ghoulish motorcycle gang in America's Southwest.

Selection of Greatest Westerns Films:

Greatest Early Westerns Films:

[The Great Train Robbery \(1903\)](#)

The Squaw Man (1914)

Truthful Tulliver (1916)

The Heart of Texas Ryan (1917)

The Covered Wagon (1923)

The Iron Horse (1924)

Riders of the Purple Sage (1925)

Tumbleweeds (1925)

In Old Arizona (1928/9)

[The Virginian \(1929\)](#)

The Big Trail (1930)

Montana Moon (1930)

Cimarron (1931)

Viva Villa! (1934)

Annie Oakley (1935)

Tumblin' Tumbleweeds (1935)

The Last of the Mohicans (1936)

The Plainsman (1936)

Rhythm of the Saddle (1938)

Allegheny Uprising (1939)

[Destry Rides Again \(1939\)](#)

Dodge City (1939)

Drums Along the Mohawk (1939)

Jesse James (1939)

★ [Stagecoach \(1939\)](#)

Union Pacific (1939)

Young Mr. Lincoln (1939)

Northwest Passage (1940)

The Return of Frank James (1940)

Santa Fe Trail (1940)

Virginia City (1940)

The Westerner (1940)

Billy the Kid (1941)

They Died With Their Boots On (1941)

Western Union (1941)

King of the Cowboys (1943)

The Outlaw (1943)

[The Ox-Bow Incident \(1943\)](#)[Duel in the Sun \(1946\)](#)★ [My Darling Clementine \(1946\)](#)

Home in Oklahoma (1947)

Pursued (1947)

★ [Red River \(1948\)](#)★ [The Treasure of the Sierra Madre \(1948\)](#)

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949)

Broken Arrow (1950)

The Gunfighter (1950)

Winchester '73 (1950)

Bend of the River (1952)

The Big Sky (1952)

★ [High Noon \(1952\)](#)

Rancho Notorious (1952)

Hondo (1953)

The Naked Spur (1953)

Pony Express (1953)

★ [Shane \(1953\)](#)

Broken Lance (1954)

Johnny Guitar (1954)

Vera Cruz (1954)

[Bad Day at Black Rock \(1955\)](#)

The Far Country (1955)

The Man From Laramie (1955)

Giant (1956)

★ [The Searchers \(1956\)](#)

Seven Men From Now (1956)

Forty Guns (1957)

Gunfight at the O.K. Corral (1957)

Run of the Arrow (1957)

The Tall T (1957)

3:10 to Yuma (1957)

The Big Country (1958)

Man of the West (1958)

Terror in a Texas Town (1958)

Ride Lonesome (1959)

Rio Bravo (1959)

Greatest John Ford Westerns Films:

Drums Along the Mohawk (1939)

★ [Stagecoach \(1939\)](#)★ [My Darling Clementine \(1946\)](#)

Fort Apache (1948)*

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949)*

Rio Grande (1950)*

Wagonmaster (1950)

★ [The Searchers \(1956\)](#)

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)

Cheyenne Autumn (1964)
 * John Ford's "Cavalry" trilogy

Greatest Recent Westerns Films:

The Alamo (1960)
 The Magnificent Seven (1960)
[The Misfits \(1961\)](#)
 Lonely Are the Brave (1962)
 Ride the High Country (1962)
 How the West Was Won (1963)
[Hud \(1963\)](#)
 McLintock! (1963)
 Cheyenne Autumn (1964)
 A Fistful of Dollars (1964, Sp./It.) (1st in Sergio Leone's "spaghetti western" trilogy)
 Cat Ballou (1965)
 For a Few Dollars More (1965, Sp./It.) (2nd in trilogy)
 Shenandoah (1965)
 The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (1966, Sp./It.) (3rd in trilogy)
 The Professionals (1966)
 El Dorado (1967)
 Hombre (1967)
 Will Penny (1968)
[Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid \(1969\)](#)
 Once Upon a Time in the West (1969, It.)
 Support Your Local Sheriff! (1969)
 True Grit (1969)
 ★ [The Wild Bunch \(1969\)](#)
 Little Big Man (1970)
 A Man Called Horse (1970)
 Rio Lobo (1970)
 Big Jake (1971)
 Hannie Caulder (1971)
 McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971)
 The Cowboys (1972)
 The Culpepper Cattle Co. (1972)
 The Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid (1972)
 High Plains Drifter (1973)
 Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid (1973)
 Westworld (1973)
[Blazing Saddles \(1974\)](#)
 Buffalo Bill and the Indians (or Sitting Bull's History Lesson) (1976)
 The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976)
 The Shootist (1976)
 Heaven's Gate (1980)
 The Long Riders (1980)
 Silverado (1985)
 Young Guns (1988)
 Lonesome Dove (1989) - TV miniseries
 Back to the Future, Part III (1990)
 Dances with Wolves (1990)
 Grim Prairie Tales (1990)
 City Slickers (1991)
 The Last of the Mohicans (1992)
[Unforgiven \(1992\)](#)
 The Ballad of Little Jo (1993)
 Posse (1993)
 Tombstone (1993)
 Bad Girls (1994)
 Maverick (1994)
 Wyatt Earp (1994)
 The Quick and the Dead (1995)
 Dead Man (1996)
 The Wild Wild West (1999)
 Shanghai Noon (2000)
 Open Range (2003)
 The Missing (2003)

Brokeback Mountain (2005)

3:10 To Yuma (2007)

No Country for Old Men (2007)

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford (2007)